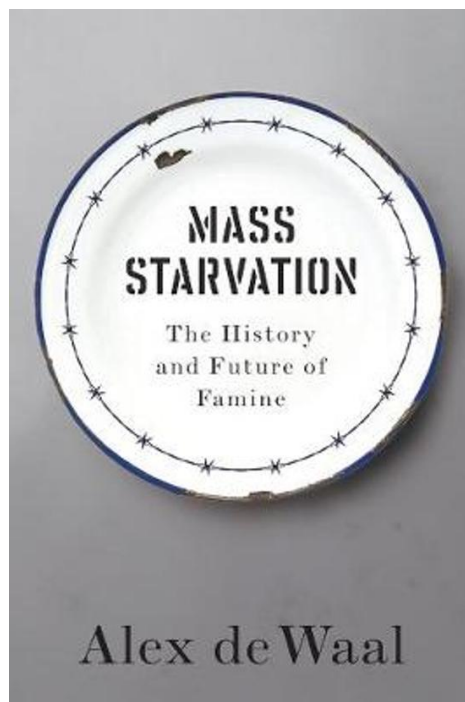


Mass Starvation

Famine as crime against
humanity

23-2-2018



Alex de Waal, Executive Director of the World Peace Foundation and Research Professor at The Fletcher School (Tufts University), is considered one of the foremost experts on the Horn of Africa and famine. He presented his book “Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine” in The Hague for Leiden University. The next day, he made time for a small expert meeting for KUNO, the platform for humanitarian knowledge exchange in the Netherlands.



KUNO is an initiative of ten NGOs and five knowledge institutes from the Dutch humanitarian sector. KUNO's goal is to strengthen the humanitarian sector in the Netherlands. KUNO is a platform for joint learning, reflection and debate. We organize expert meetings, working sessions for professionals, webinars, training and public debates. All of our events are cross-sectoral and organized in cooperation with our partners.

www.kuno-platform.nl

kuno@kuno-platform.nl

Authors: Renate de Waard (KUNO) & Peter Heintze (KUNO)

Introduction

Mass Starvation is not the first book by Alex de Waal about famine. He wrote *Famine that Kills: Darfur, Sudan* in 1989 and *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* in 1997. In his introduction to *Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine* on 23 February 2018, he explained that he hoped to be able to call this book *Mass Starvation: The History of Famine*, but unfortunately this is not the case. Famines still occur. Professor de Waal also emphasized that famine should often be called starvation because it is inflicted, man-made and a crime against humanity. He argues that we should overcome the misconception that famine has something to do with drought, deserts, etc. There are plenty examples of starvation in history: operation Barbarossa in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Auschwitz, the bombing of Japan by the United States, the British colonists in India. De Waal conveys his message in seven key points, a challenge for humanitarians and a manifesto for ending mass starvation.

Speaker:

- **Professor Alex de Waal**, Executive Director of the World Peace Foundation and Research Professor at The Fletcher School (Tufts University)

1. Famines have become rarer and less lethal – and could be ended for good

Professor de Waal explains that famine is not history, but famine mortality has declined since the 1980s (figure 1). The main reason for the decline in mortality rates is an improvement in public health. This indicates the success of the humanitarian enterprise: humanitarian aid has helped by addressing issues regarding public health, and making sure that these areas are much more technically equipped. Humanitarian organizations are now aware that they cannot solve political problems, so other solutions must be sought after. De Waal: “The number one consequence of famine is not death: it is migration! Migration is a manmade phenomenon.”

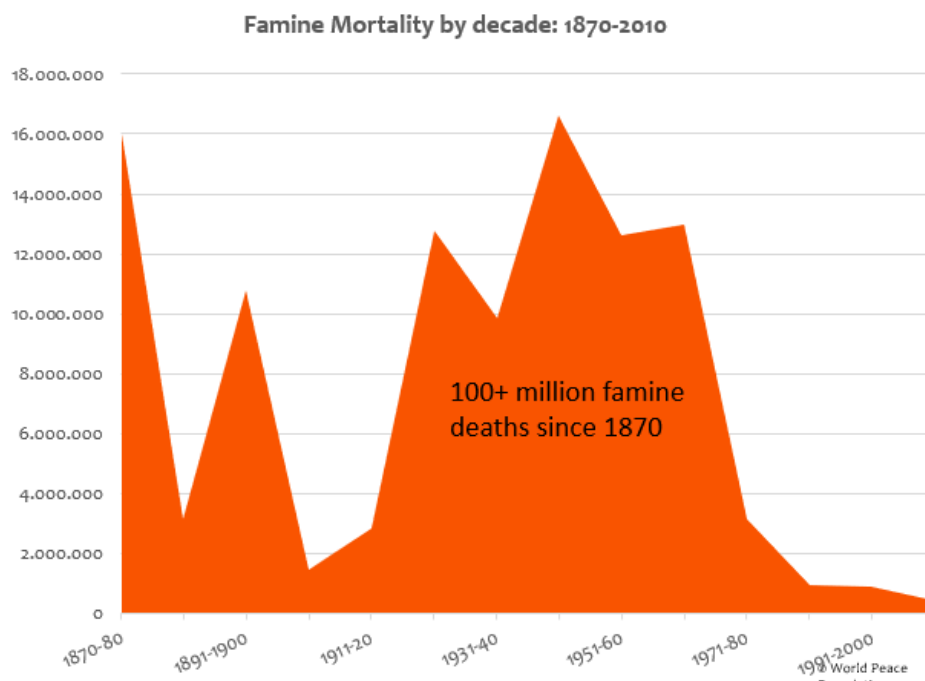


Figure 1: Famine Mortality by decade: 1870-2010. World Peace Foundation

“The main reason for the decline in mortality rates is an improvement in public health.”

2. Famines are not natural disasters – especially today

Famines are not natural disasters, argues professor de Waal. Armed conflict and political repression are more influential (figures 2 and 3).

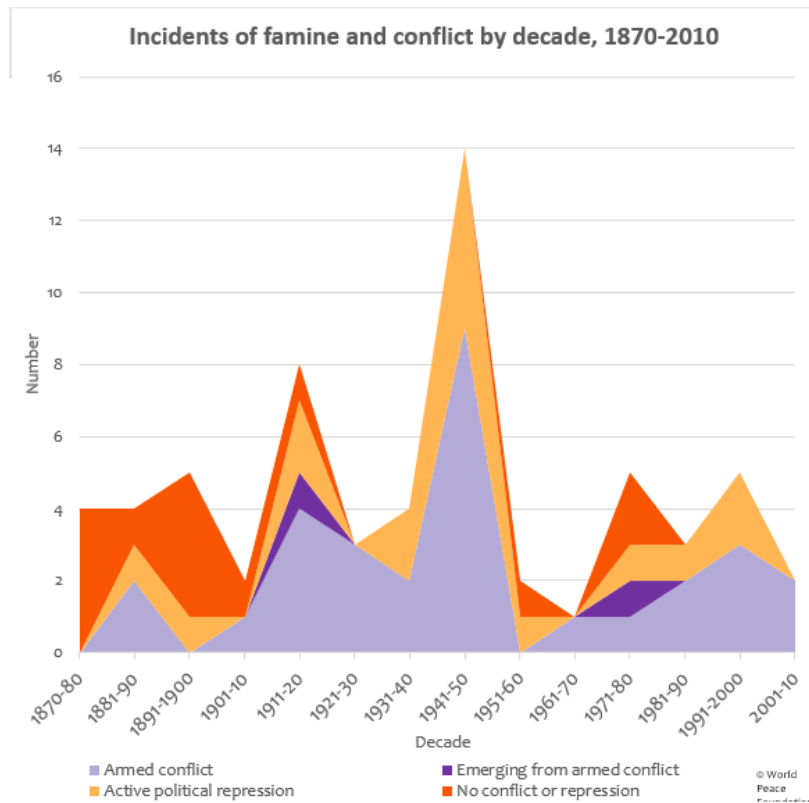


Figure 2: Incidents of famine and conflict by decade 1870-2010. World Peace Foundation.

Famine Mortality 1870-2010

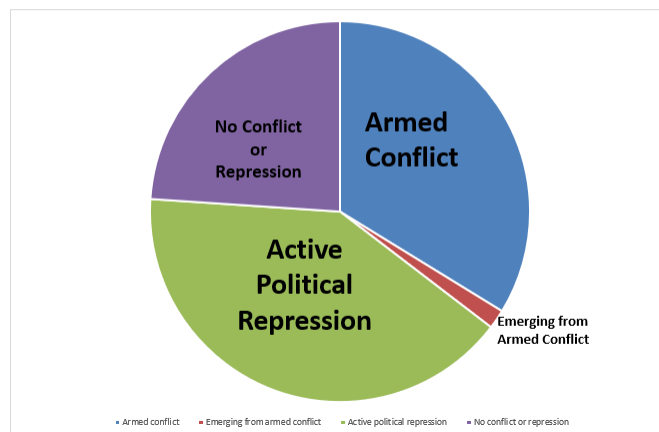


Figure 3: Famine Mortality 1870-2010. World Peace Foundation.

3. Famines are not a principally African phenomenon

It is often thought that famines mainly happen in Africa. De Waal argues that this is not true. In his research, he distinguishes several eras of famine. The first is the colonial era. The second is the period of the First World War, the interbellum, and the Second World War, with famines mainly in Europe and Asia. From 1950 to 1980 is the post-colonial era, with famines in Asia, for instance China and Cambodia (Khmer Rouge era). From 1980 to the present, most famines can be seen in Africa and the Middle East. Figure 4 illustrates these eras and the different geographical locations.

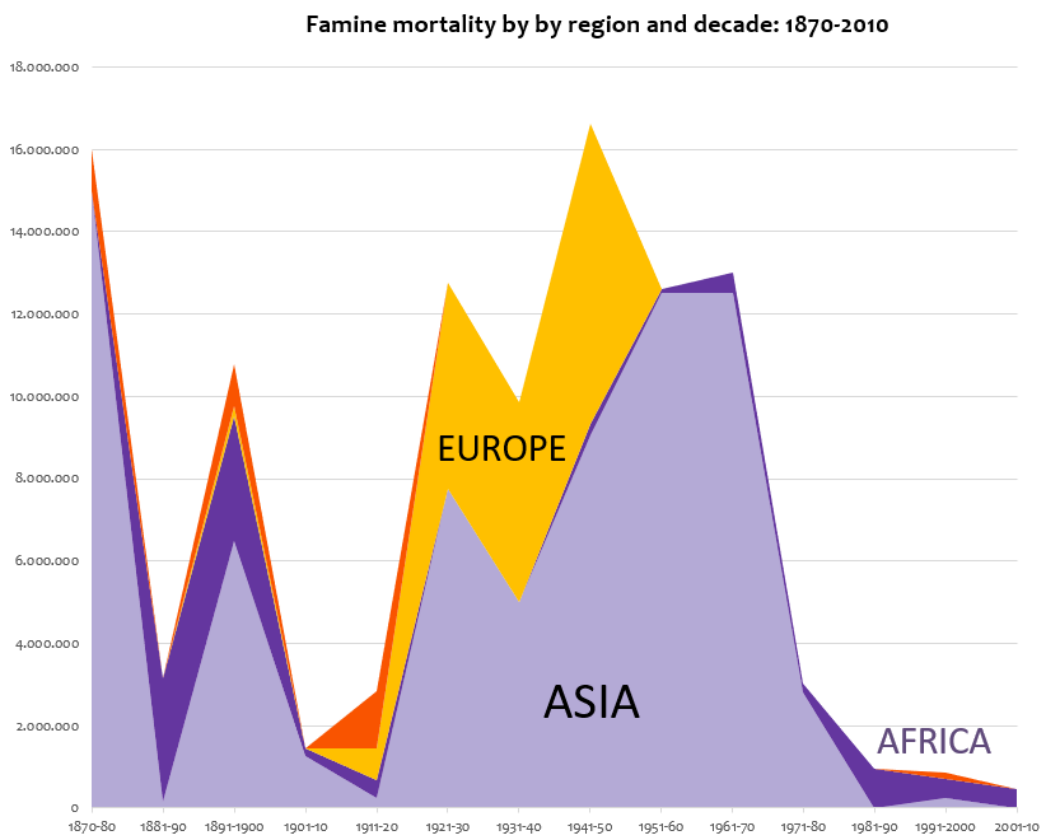


Figure 4: Famine mortality by region and decade, 1870-2010. World Peace Foundation.

4. Famines are exceptional and multi-causal; the vortex where different issues meet and combine

Famines always have numerous causes. De Waal: “Several elements, such as poverty, high food prices, war, inequality and forced displacement, interact in a vortex. The famine in Somalia in 2011, for instance, derived from a vortex of several problems: a global food crisis, the El Niño drought, corruption in the country, restriction of aid because of high terrorist risk (Al Shabaab). The United Nations and other agencies could not provide aid.” In short, a famine never has just one cause.

5. Famines are not the outcome of overpopulation

Figure 5 says it all: famines are not caused by overpopulation, according to De Waal. Malthusian explanations are therefore not correct.

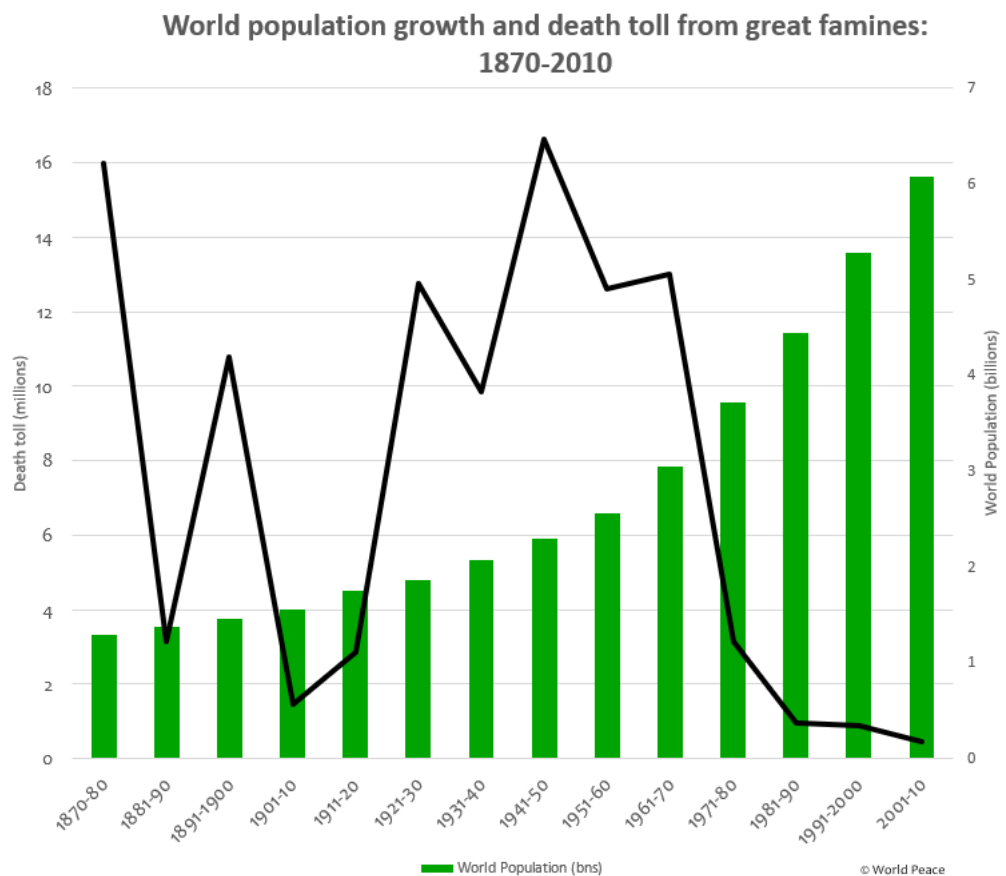


Figure 5: World population growth and death toll from great famines: 1870-2010

6. Famines are inflicted: “to starve” is transitive

Professor de Waal argues that famines are inflicted. He indicates ‘faminogenic acts’ in four degrees. De Waal: “The first degree is when governments or other authorities deliberately use famine as a tool of extermination or a means of forcing a population to submit to their control. Second degree faminogenic acts happen when public authorities pursue policies that are the principal cause of famine, and continue to pursue these policies even after becoming aware that they result in famine.” De Waal describes that faminogenic acts are of the third degree when public authorities are indifferent: “their policies may not be the principal cause of famine, but they do little or nothing to alleviate hunger”. The fourth degree can be indicated when the authorities who are incapable or incapacitated, are faced with food crises caused by external factors (climatic, economic et cetera), and are unable to respond effectively to the needs. Figure 6 shows the occurrence of faminogenic acts in different degrees over time. Figure 7 shows that most famines happen because of recklessness: “those in power have other priorities than keeping people alive”, according to De Waal.

Incidents of faminogenic behaviour and famine, by decade, 1870-2010

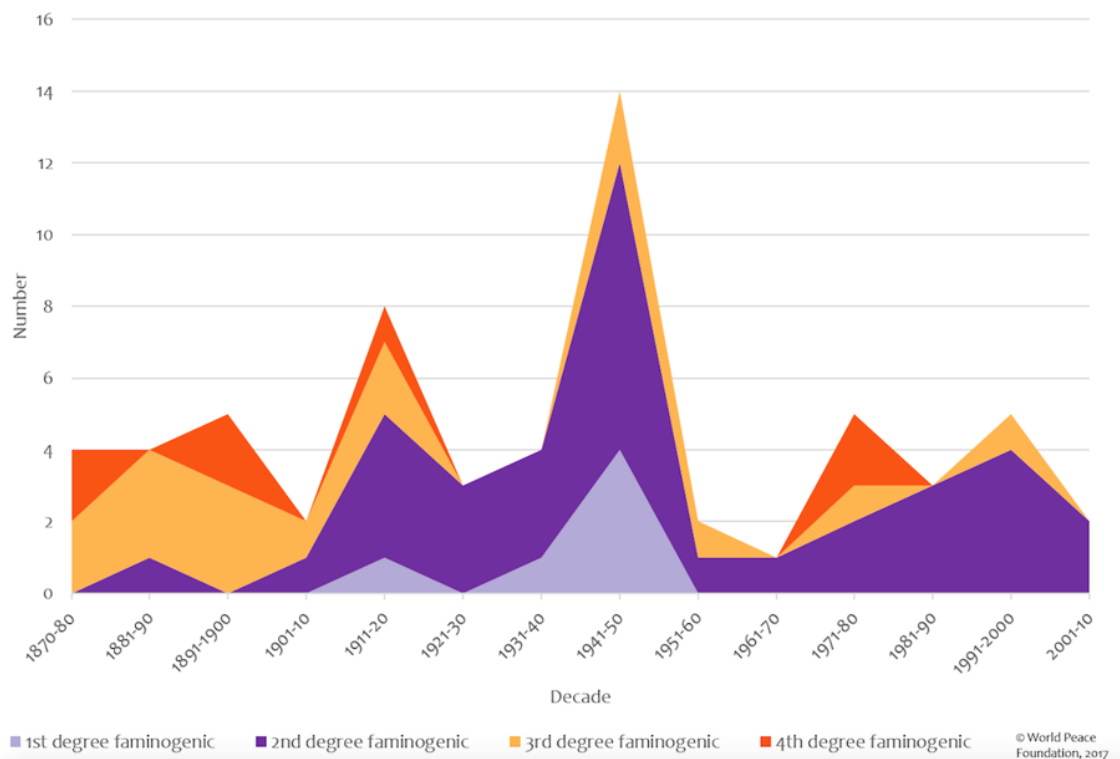


Figure 6: Incidents of faminogenic behavior and famine, by decade, 1870-2010. World Peace Foundation.

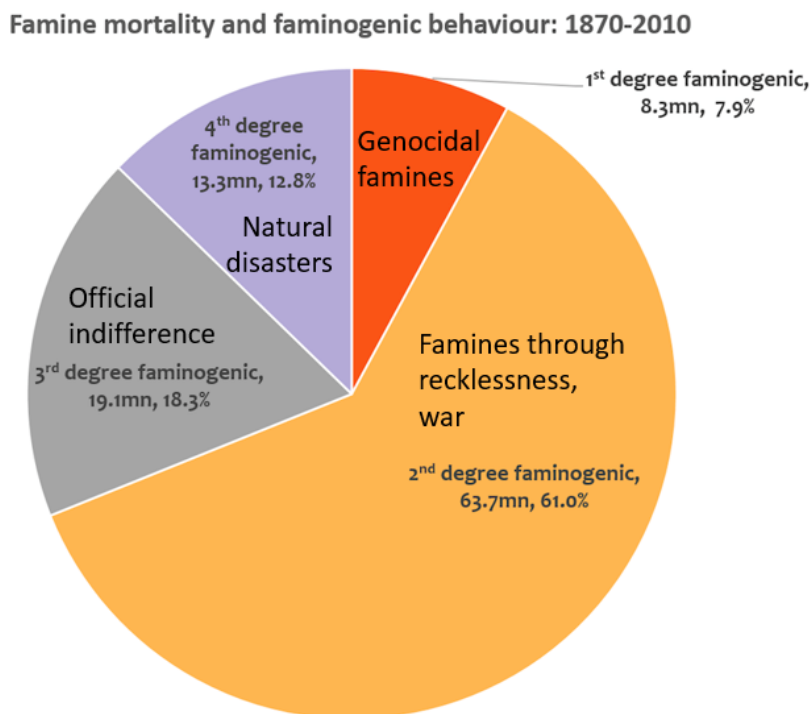


Figure 7: Famine mortality and faminogenic behaviour, 1870-2010. World Peace Foundation.

7. There is enough law on the books to criminalize famine, just not enough public or political passion to make it happen

Professor de Waal: “The Geneva Conventions and Crimes against Humanity both prohibit starvation. But there have been no prosecutions for starvation crimes in Cambodia, Ethiopia or Former Yugoslavia. You could compare starvation with rape as a weapon of war, or the use of chemical weapons. These are acts that are also morally disapproved of, and reasons to prosecute. Acts of starvation have never been prosecuted, but this could happen. There is enough law on the books. But, he asks, “how to prosecute starvation crimes where the intent is complex and excess deaths are the product of recklessness?” Political will and public clamour should be generated. The context is unfavourable, however. “Most people still think about famine in narratives of natural disasters. This narrative implies that famines are not man-made. Also, the UN and liberal humanitarian multilateralism is weakening.”

“How to prosecute starvation crimes where the intent is complex and excess deaths are the product of recklessness?”

A challenge for humanitarians and a manifesto for ending mass starvation

“This leads to a challenge for the humanitarian sector. How can we undertake practical humanitarian action, when the same men responsible for starvation are also capable of blocking assistance? This is a hostage-like situation,” argues De Waal. Examples are Somalia in 2011 and Yemen today.

Political will is necessary. De Waal therefore argues: “Our ultimate goal is to render mass starvation so morally toxic, that it is universally publicly vilified. We aim to make mass starvation unthinkable, so that political and military leaders in a position to inflict it or fail to prevent it, will unhesitatingly ensure that it does not occur, and the public will demand this of them.”

“Our ultimate goal is to render mass starvation so morally toxic that it is universally publicly vilified.”

United Nations Security Council: resolution 2417

On 24 May 2018, the Security Council adopted resolution 2417 unanimously. This resolution condemns the starving of civilians as a method of warfare. This resolution was proposed by the Netherlands, Côte d’Ivoire, Kuwait and Sweden. For more information on the resolution, please follow [this link](#).